

LANGUAGE AWARENESS WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON GRAMMAR PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

In 1970s, Language Awareness (LA) was put forward, primarily by modern linguists, as a new 'bridging' element in the UK school curriculum. It was viewed as a solution to several of the failures in the UK schools: illiteracy in English, failure to learn foreign languages, and divisive prejudices. To Van Lier (2001) current interest in LA stems from three sources: Pedagogically oriented LA, Consciousness raising, and critical perspective. This paper concentrates on psycholinguistic focus on consciousness-raising (hereafter C-R activities) and explicit attention to language form or grammar. Three relevant issues are discussed here. Firstly, the nature of LA, its principles, objectives and procedures are discussed. Secondly, this study delves into the main justifications and implications of LA. Last but not the least, this paper tries to present an overview of the rationale behind the use of C-R activities in teaching grammar and current perspectives in grammar teaching.

Key words: Language Awareness, Grammar pedagogy, Consciousness Raising, Critical Perspectives

Introduction

Carter (2003) believes Language awareness (LA) as the development in learners of an enhanced consciousness of and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language. The approach has been developed in contexts of both second and foreign language learning, and in mother-tongue language education, where the term 'knowledge about language' has sometimes been preferred. The concept of language awareness is not new. Van Essen (1997, cited in Carter, 2003) points to a long tradition in several European countries. The approach was, however, associated in the 1980s with a reaction to those more prescriptive approaches to language learning which were generally typified by atomistic analysis of language, and reinforced by narrowly formalistic methodologies, such as grammar translation, drills, and pattern practice. However, the language awareness movement also developed a parallel impetus in reaction to the relative neglect of attention to forms of language within some versions of communicative language teaching methodologies.

Language awareness: Some definitions

Language Awareness (LA) is a mental attribute which develops through paying moti-

vated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work. It is also a pedagogic approach that aims to help learners to gain such insights. A key element of a Language Awareness approach is that learners 'discover language for themselves'. According to Hawkins (1999), it involves challenging 'pupils to ask questions about language', encouraging learners 'to gather their own data from the world outside school', and helping learners to develop a 'growing insight into the way language works to convey meaning.' Tomlinson (1994, p. 123) views Language Awareness as something 'dynamic and intuitive', which is 'gradually developed internally by the learner.' And Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995, p. iv cited in Bolitho et.al, 2003) see Language Awareness as helping to develop 'a healthy spirit of enquiry', and as establishing the classroom as a place where 'the only views of language that matter are the ones that teachers and learners have built up in their heads.' However, van Lier (2001, p. 163) draws attention to the 'traditional end' of the Language Awareness movement, which 'might include explicit teaching of form, metalinguistic rules, and terminology'. It is important to distinguish between a teaching approach which advocates giving explicit knowledge to the learners, and a Language

Awareness approach, which is actually a reaction against such top-down transmission of language knowledge. Language Awareness is not taught by the teacher or by the course book; it is developed by the learner. Language Awareness is an internal, gradual, realization of the realities of language use. It is driven by the positively curious learner paying conscious attention to instances of language in an attempt to discover and articulate patterns of language use.

Principles, objectives and procedures

To Pienemann (1985, cited in Hawkins, 1999) the main *principle underlying LA* is that most learners learn best whilst affectively engaged, and when they willingly invest energy and attention in the learning process. Another principle is that paying deliberate attention to features of language in use can help learners to notice the gap between their own performance in the target language, and the performance of proficient users of the language. This noticing can give salience to a feature, so that it becomes more noticeable in future input, and thereby contributes to the learner's psychological readiness to acquire that feature.

Tomlinson (1994, p. 122) remarks the main *objective in LA* is to help learners to notice for themselves how language is typically used so that they will note the gaps and 'achieve learning readiness'. Other objectives include helping learners to develop such cognitive skills as connecting, generalizing, and hypothesizing, and helping learners to become independent, with positive attitudes towards the language, and to learning the language beyond the classroom.

Moreover, as far as the procedures in LA is concerned, Tomilton (1994) cites that the aim is to involve the learners in affective interaction with a potentially engaging text, so as to be able to achieve their own mental representation of the text, and to articulate their personal responses to it. Then the learners are asked to focus on a particular feature of the text, to work with others to identify instances of this feature, and to make discoveries and articulate generalizations about its use. They are then encouraged to test their generalization by searching for other instances on other text.

Main justifications

According to Bolitho, et.al. (2003) there are two main practical benefits for language pedagogy in LA: First, Language Awareness approaches can provide a tangible, more holistic and teacher-friendly framework for aspects of the Communicative Approach.

Second, a Language Awareness approach can provide balance to the more form-focused, atomistic approaches.

Van Lier (2001) believes that the main justification in LA stems largely from three sources: First a practical, pedagogically oriented LA such as that of the LA movement in the UK; second, a more psycholinguistic focus on consciousness-raising and explicit attention to language form; and third, a critical, ideological perspective that looks at language and power, control and emancipation.

This paper concentrates on the second interest in LA which is based on psycholinguistic focus on consciousness-raising and explicit attention to language form or grammar. In line with van Lier justifications, Nunan et.al. (1995, p.2) argued that "the discussion of LA within the SLA literature focus mainly on grammar". Therefore this study delves into recent perspectives in L2 education on grammar pedagogy.

Language Awareness and Consciousness raising

What is Consciousness?

Consciousness (like many other concepts such as language) is not a single object or a unitary construct (van Lier, 1998). It is possible to identify many layers, levels, and facets of consciousness.

Reviewing the literature, one would come up with two prominent, widely discussed treatments of consciousness: the traditional cognitive perspective and a less common perspective which sees consciousness as social and contextual (Schmidt, 1990, van Lier, 1998). The traditional perspective of consciousness is a cognitive one. This perspective resting on several assumptions holds that consciousness is individual rather than social, that there is a sharp distinction between mind and body, and that the mind is located in the brain. In this perspective, it is common to identify several different types or levels of consciousness (Schmidt, 1994; van Lier, 1998), including:

- **Level 1:** *Global ('intransitive') consciousness:* just being alive and awake. This is the most basic level which we share with all animals (Wittgenstein, 1980, cited in van Lier, 1998).
- **Level 2:** *Awareness (or 'transitive' consciousness, consciousness of something):* perceptual activity of objects and events in the environment,

including attention, focusing, and vigilance. This level of consciousness is gradable in contrast to the previous one: there are various degrees and intensities of attention, alertness, vigilance, etc.

- **Level 3: Metacconsciousness:** awareness of the activity of the mind; language awareness; knowledge about mental processes, metalinguistic awareness of formal linguistic properties, communicable knowledge.
- **Level 4: Voluntary action, reflective processes, mindfulness:** deliberate and purposeful engagement in actions.

James (1996) differentiated LA raising and CR. To him LA raising is drawing attention to those formal properties of a language he knows, in order to expand his communicative capacity, but CR is activity that develops the ability to locate and identify the *discrepancy* between one's present state of knowledge and a goal state of knowledge. CR gives the learner an equally important but *different* insight into what he does *not* know and therefore needs to learn, if he is to put such deficiencies right.

Traditional approach to grammar teaching

Ellis (1994) remarks the traditional approach to grammar teaching is PPP which signifies the "Presentation, Practice, Production" sequence for organizing activities in a lesson. In PPP lesson, the teacher introduce a new linguistic form to learners via a focused presentation, which often includes contextualization of the new form, a deductive explanation or elicitation of how it works and some tightly production activities (e.g. repetition drills). Next, the learners are giving practices activities focusing on form instead of meaning. Finally in production stage, control is relaxed in free practice activities which prompt the learners to engage in meaningful exchanges via tasks which elicit use of the target form.

The suitability of a deductive method of grammar teaching has been called into question by theoretical as well as applied linguists. The preeminent linguist Chomsky firmly believes that one does not learn the grammatical structure of a second language through "explanation and instruction" beyond the most rudimentary elements, for the simple reason that no one has enough explicit knowledge about this structure to provide explanation and instruction (Chomsky, 1970, cited in Ellis, 1994). What he implies is that the linguistic system of a language, any language, is so complex that even theoretical

linguists who spend their lives trying to describe, explain, and understand it have not been able to do so satisfactorily. Therefore, it is too much to expect either the language teacher or the language learner to do so. In spite of persistent questions about the feasibility of explicit grammar description and instruction, the deductive method of grammar teaching has long been a desired method for many teachers and learners, but it has come under heavy criticism recently.

Deductive approach encourages very little teacher-learner interaction and almost no learner-learner interaction that is necessary to create an environment conducive to self-discovery. Once a grammatical rule is explicitly stated, the natural tendency of the learners will be not to think about its underlying rationale—a tendency that might lead to a superficial knowledge rather than a sound understanding of the rule. This might be one reason why we often come across learners who can supply the correct grammar on a class test but cannot use it for communicative purposes outside the class. Ellis (2002) believes teachability hypothesis is one of the strong theoretical explanations for the failure of the practice in promoting acquisition, this hypothesis states that learners cannot be taught structures they are not ready to acquire.

Another major flaw in PPP, some claim, is its excessive emphasis on productive practice. Asking students to use new grammar immediately may not only be unnecessary but "counterproductive, in that it may distract attention away from the brain work involved in understanding and restructuring" of the learner's interlanguage (Thornbury, 1999).

Skehan (1996) rejects such a view in teaching grammar due to the lack of the impressive evidence in support of such an approach as well as poor levels of attainment of the students, since according to Skehan (1996) students leave school with very little in the way of usable language. Dave Willis (1996) describes as a fallacy the idea that controlled practice leads to mastery of grammar.

The review of the literature reveals the fact that using practice activities in teaching grammar does not live up to the expectations and reconsideration of the approaches to grammar teaching is needed.

Teaching grammar through C-R activities: the psycholinguistic Focus

Kumaradivelu (2003) believes learning through self-discovery rather than learning from teacher explanation will favorably affect grammar learning in particular and language learning in general. In inductive approach learners will be

able to comprehend and retain better if they themselves discover the grammatical rules. Kumaradivelu mentioned language awareness facilitates the process of noticing or consciousness-raising on the part of the learners. It is then possible that such a process of noticing could activate the learners' intuitive heuristics, ultimately enhancing their state of readiness to internalize the grammatical system of their L2.

Consciousness raising, like many innovations in ELT, originated from dissatisfaction with ideas that preceded it; Namely dissatisfaction with the outcome of the grammar teaching through the PPP approach using practice (e.g. drills). Consciousness-raising activities constitute activities which attempt to equip the learners with an understanding of a specific grammatical feature. Willis and Willis (1996) state that the purpose of C-R activities is to provide learners with activities which encourage them to think about samples of language and draw their own conclusion about how the language works. To Ellis (2002), a language learning program should seek to draw out learners' conscious attention to problematic grammatical features, not with the expectancy that they would master these features and use them in communication immediately: but, rather, the expectancy would be that they learn what it is that they have ultimately to master". Willis and Willis (1996) list some categories of consciousness raising activity types in which C-R might achieve this:

- identify and consolidate patterns or usages;
- classifying items according to their semantic or structural characteristics;
- cross-language exploration;
- reconstruction and deconstruction;
- recall;
- reference training

Rather than production, teachers should aim only at drawing learners' attention to important features of the form under study in other words, raising their consciousness. In C-R activities the learners are not expected to produce the target structure, but only to understand it by formulating some kind of cognitive representation of how it works (Ellis 1994). According to Ellis (2004) the desired outcome of a C-R task is awareness of how some linguistic features work.

Willis and Willis (1996) argue that the rationale for the use of C- R activities draws partly on the hypothesized role for explicit knowledge as facilitator for the acquisition of implicit knowledge.

Put simply, consciousness-raising (C-R) refers to a deliberate attempt to draw the

learner's explicit attention to features of the target language, particularly to its grammatical features. This may look deceptively similar to traditional grammar teaching, but, as Rutherford (1987, p. 24, cited in Kumaradivelu, 2003) points out, C-R differs from it in fundamental ways. First, C-R "is a means to attainment of grammatical competence . . . whereas 'grammar teaching' typically represents an attempt to instill that competence directly". Second, C-R treats an explicit focus on grammar as necessary *but not* sufficient for developing grammatical competence whereas traditional grammar teaching treats it as necessary *and* sufficient. Third, C-R acknowledges the learner's active role in grammar construction; traditional grammar teaching considers the learner *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Finally, traditional grammar teaching is concerned mainly with syntax, while C-R is concerned with syntax and its relation to semantics, discourse, and pragmatics. Because the term *consciousness* does not lend itself to a clear-cut definition, Sharwood Smith (1991, cited in Kumaradivelu, 2003) suggested *input enhancement* in the place of *consciousness-raising*.

Ellis (2002) characterizes C-R activities as follows:

- an attempt to isolate a specific feature for focused attention
- the provision of data which illustrate the targeted feature and provision of an explicit rule describing the feature
- the requirement that learner undertake
- an intellectual effort to understand the feature
- deliberate attempt to involve the learner in hypothesizing about the target structure
- the clarification in the form of further data and description in case there is misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the feature

To Ellis, C-R activities contribute to the processes of noticing and comparing and results in explicit knowledge and may contribute to the process of integration only when the learner is developmentally ready. That is to say, if L2/FL learners have explicit knowledge of a certain feature of the L2/FL, they are more likely to notice its occurrence in the communicatively embedded input they receive. Explicit knowledge of this sort may then make it easier for them to carry out "cognitive comparisons" between their internal interlanguage norms and the target norms exemplified by the available input, or indeed via feedback. So it is not so much the explicit knowledge *per se* which contributes to second language acquisition. It rather initiates a process which starts with the detection of L2/FL features (Eckerth, 2008) This suggests that formal instruction

should be targeted at explicit rather than implicit knowledge because, while formal instruction may affect the acquisition of simple grammatical structure that the student is developmentally ready for, it is difficult to determine when the student is ready to learn that structure. Instruction should also be aimed at making the students aware of the structure so that they are able to monitor it and correct their own errors; they do not necessarily have to be able to use the structure immediately. Fotos and Ellis (1991) believe the most effective approach to grammar teaching is to focus on awareness raising rather than practice.

Task-based approach to grammar instruction

Fotos and Ellis (1991) recommended a task-based approach to grammar instruction using a task type which provides learners with grammar problems to solve interactively. Called a grammar consciousness raising task, it is communicative and has an L2 grammar problem as the task content. Although the learners focus on the form of the grammar structure, they are also engaged in meaning-focused use of the target language as they solve the grammar problem. They develop grammatical knowledge while they are communicating. It must be noted, however, that a number of other researchers have also recommended a task-based approach to grammar instruction. Some suggest the use of tasks aimed at promoting accurate production of the target feature (Ur, 1988, cited in Fotos, 1994). Others (Dickins & Woods, 1988) emphasize the consciousness-raising function of task performance. The use of tasks which require interpretive comprehension of input containing the correct usage of the target form has been suggested (Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993). Another proposal (Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1990, cited in Fotos, 1994) recommends the creation of structure-based communicative tasks in which production of the target structure is essential to complete the task content, which is non grammatical in nature. Both types of tasks are consciousness-raising because the learners' attention is focused on the nature of the required target structure. This type of approach is similar to the one employed by Doughty (1991) and is consistent with the aim of manipulating meaningful context to draw learners' attention to problematic grammatical features.

There are two main differences between the use of such consciousness-raising communicative tasks and the type of grammar consciousness-raising tasks. The first concerns the nature of the task content. Whereas the former task is non grammatical, but requires either recognition

of the target structure or its use in reaching the task solution, the content of the grammar consciousness-raising task is the target structure itself. Second, the grammar consciousness raising task is not aimed at developing immediate ability to use the target structure but rather attempts to call learner attention to grammatical features, raising their consciousness of them, and thereby facilitating subsequent learner noticing of the features in communicative input.

LA and Recent perspectives on L2 education in grammar pedagogy

The debate about the importance of grammar and whether it should be taught explicitly has a long history, with different views prevailing, at least in certain sectors of L2 education, at various times. Contrasting traditions seem to have developed, for instance, in ESL and EFL contexts - with the latter exhibiting a greater tendency to retain an explicit focus on the teaching of grammar (Hughes & McCarthy, 1998; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell, 1997, cited in Andrew, 2007).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the role of form-focused instruction in L2 education (i.e. explicit teaching of grammar) was challenged in a number of ways, but particularly as a result of the advent of the Communicative Approach to language teaching (CLT), which prompted a re-evaluation of the role of grammar, causing a 'switch of attention from teaching the language system to teaching the language as communication' (Howatt, 1984, p. 277, cited in Andrew, 2007).

Ellis & Batstone (2009) have argued that the goal of grammar teaching should be to assist learners to acquire new form-meaning mappings and to integrate these into their existing form-meaning system. The three principles have been articulated with this goal in mind. *The Given-to-New Principle* is a principle designed to guide our thinking both about the learning and about the teaching of new form-meaning connections. In terms of learning it highlights two important processes: engaging with relevant meaning which the learner already knows, and using this meaning as a basis for making a new link into the grammar. In terms of teaching it facilitates these processes by suggesting ways to establish 'given' meaning and ways of guiding learners to make the connection from 'given' meaning to its 'new' encoding in the grammar.

The Awareness Principle affirms the importance of consciousness in language learning and suggests ways in which consciousness at the levels of noticing, understanding and actual use (e.g.

monitoring) can be operationalized in instructional activities.

The real-operating conditions principle points to the need to ensure that students have the opportunity to experience target features in the kind of language use that they will experience outside the classroom. This requires activities where there is a primary focus on meaning but it also allows for attention to form, including of the more explicit kind, to be incorporated into an activity as it is implemented.

Pedagogical implications

Language teachers are challenged to use creative and innovative attempts to teach grammar to provide the students with knowledge of the way language is constructed. Using C-R activities to teach grammar may be an example of such innovative.

It implies that learners should be aware of the structure, but not expected to produce accurate sentences using the structure. The long term advantage of C-R is that learners will internalize the knowledge of the structure when they are internally ready.

The use of C-R activities can help students develop an ability to form their own hypotheses about grammar in the process of learning, and can be considered as a good facilitator of language acquisition. According to Willis & Willis (1996) the benefits of C-R activities are that they encourage students to observe and analyze language for themselves'. The proponents of the use of C-R activities in teaching grammar argue that students who are aware of a grammatical feature are more likely to notice it when they subsequently encounter it, hence they suggest that teachers should focus more on raising students' consciousness of the grammatical features than their ability to produce the features in a controlled context.

Conclusions

This paper has concentrated on the second interest in LA proposed by Van Lier (2001) which is based on psycholinguistic focus on consciousness-raising and explicit attention to language form or grammar. In one respect, this does not constitute a radical departure from what teachers have always done. Many teachers have felt the need to provide formal explanations of grammatical points. But in another respect, it does represent a real alternative in that it removes from grammar teaching the need to provide learners with repeated opportunities to produce the target structure. So much effort has gone into devising ingenious ways of eliciting and

shaping learners' responses, more often too little or no avail as learners do not acquire the structures they have practiced. Consciousness-raising constitutes an approach to grammar teaching which is compatible with current thinking about how learners acquire L2 grammar. It also constitutes an approach that accords with progressive views about education as a process of discovery through problem-solving tasks. In other words, C-R activities deemphasize forms of productive practices. Therefore applying C-R activities in EFL context in IRAN may respond negatively to classroom since students come to class expecting opportunities to use what they have learned. To solve this problem this article suggest a combination of approaches: A teacher introduces a new linguistic form via a C-R activities and reinforce it with productive practice exercises.

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